

February 3, 2021

Dear members of the Connecticut General Assembly:

The Connecticut chapter of the National Organization for Women, committed to advancing women's rights and ending all forms of discrimination, joins in partnership with the 17 additional organizations listed below to urge you to support HB 6105 - An Act Concerning Access to Original Birth Records By Adult Adopted Persons. HB 6105 would eradicate a misguided law put in place in the 1970s to "protect" Connecticut women, but instead is no more than a thinly veiled effort to silence and marginalize them.

There is an assumption that birth parents, especially birth mothers, are adversaries of adult adoptees when it comes to the question of restoring adult adoptees' rights to their original birth certificates. However, for the majority of adult adoptees and their birth parents, nothing is further from the truth. Birth mothers have testified in support of HB 6105 and, in doing so, have revealed a stain on our society about the actual circumstances surrounding the relinquishment of their children.

It is here where our support as women is rooted. *Concerned United Birthparents*, an organization made up of those with a lived birth parent experience, tells us about the great injustices done to women who relinquished their children. In written testimony submitted to the Legislature supporting HB 6105, they write: *"This misguided attempt to 'protect our privacy' actually perpetuates the shame that was originally inflicted on us by a society that rejected us as women and mothers."* Moreover, Connecticut birth mothers elaborate how this shame was a reality in their own testimonies:

*"I never sought confidentiality as a birthmother. Anonymity was forced upon me."* – Southbury, CT, birth mother Dr. Judy Kelly

*"I was promised many things by social workers before I signed surrender papers—that my life would go on as if my pregnancy never happened, that I would forget, that my daughter would lead a better life than I could have given her. I was never given any assurance of anonymity."* – Bethel, CT, birth mother Karen Waggoner

*"The agency made it abundantly clear my rights to my child would be terminated and that I was not allowed to attempt to interfere with the adoptive family. I don't believe they were concerned for MY privacy."* – Newington, CT, birth mother Holly Harlow

The Connecticut Legislature's vote in 1975 to seal the birth records of all adoptees—even for those who already knew the names of their biological parents as allowed under the law at that time—took place as part of an era where being pregnant, without being married, was almost the worst thing a woman could do. Starting in the late 1940s and ending around the time of this vote, this was a time in our history when single women who became pregnant were sent away, forced

to live under assumed names, received “rehabilitation services” to help ensure they wouldn’t “repeat their mistake,” and were then told that they had absolutely no choice but to give up their babies, even though this was not the truth. During this period known as the “Baby Scoop Era,” more than 4 million mothers across the U.S. gave up their babies, including approximately 40,000 from Connecticut.

These statistics are as astounding as the shame cast on these “ruined women.” Doctors, nurses and social workers told them that they should forget that this “unfortunate situation” ever occurred and move on with their lives. What health and adoption experts know today, however, is that this secrecy instead inflicted ongoing pain. Citing the chronic physical and mental health issues that too many of these birth mothers have suffered, 27 Connecticut health and human service organizations have stated unwavering support for HB 6105, including the Connecticut State Medical Society, the Connecticut Council on Adoption, the Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Parents, and the Connecticut chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg warned that we should be “suspicious of women-only protective legislation.” Yet Connecticut’s current law renders those caught in adoption—both adult adoptees and birth parents—as second-class citizens, living their entire lives under government-imposed gag orders that continue forced silence based in shame.

This misogynistic and outdated law treats adult women as if they require special legal protections given only to children and the legally incompetent. Keeping this law in place perpetuates the demeaning stereotype that women who relinquished their children are weak and less-than-competent adults who need state protection to handle their most basic affairs and personal choices. It is disrespectful of their autonomy and capacity as adults. Women are capable of managing their personal business and should be treated as full, equal adults under the law.

Furthermore, adult adopted women (and men) are also discriminated against by existing law. Against their will and without their consent, they have been deprived of a basic birthright to know their origins like all other citizens. Lack of knowledge of family medical history also puts adoptees at risk and, in too many instances, has led to life-threatening situations for them or their children.

Connecticut legislators have the opportunity today to be leaders in the ongoing fight for women’s equality. Passing HB 6105 would repeal a law, written by men, that deemed women too “fragile” to speak in their own voices. It would put an end to an oppressive era in Connecticut history that denied women their choice of whether to parent, denied women the ability to control their sexuality and bodies, and that supported the premise that any woman who had broken society’s patriarchal norms by becoming pregnant “out of wedlock” should be shunned and shamed.

Our support for HB 6105 is about restoring optionality, giving all women a choice where they had none before, and treating all people equally under one consistent law. The time is now. The right side of history is today. Support *HB 6105, An Act Concerning Access to Original Birth Records By Adult Adopted Persons* along with the truth, equality, and justice it provides.

Sincerely,

Access Connecticut

Action Together CT

Charter Oak Cultural Center

Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ

Connecticut Council on Adoption

Connecticut Indivisible

Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund

Fairfield Standing United

ForwardCT

Women Against Mass Incarceration

National Association of Social Workers, Connecticut Chapter

National Organization for Women, Connecticut Chapter

The Connecticut Women's Consortium

True Colors

West Haven Progressive Action Network

Women's March Connecticut Chapter

YWCA Greenwich

YWCA Hartford Region